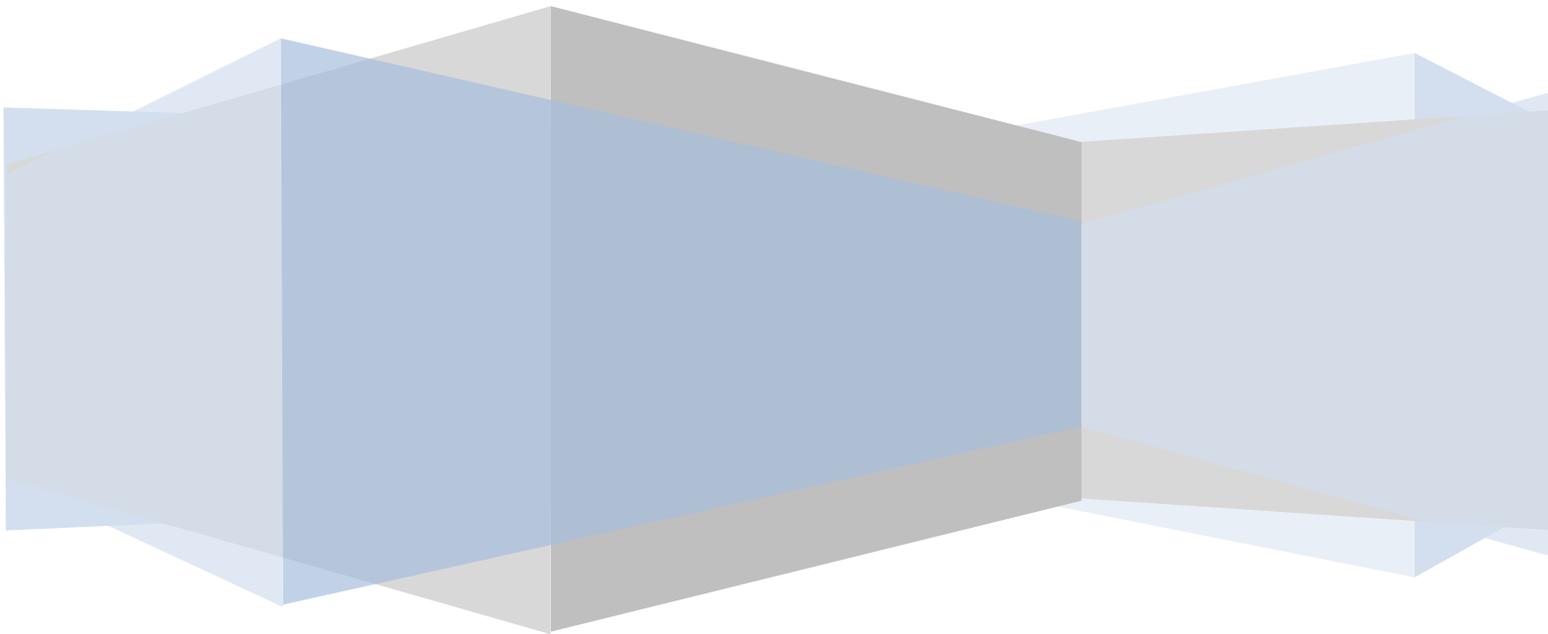


Answering the Question of Our Time, Together

A Strategy to Address the Climate Crisis and a Call
to Collaboration

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Climate change poses an imminent threat to human civilization.¹ Droughts, floods, severe weather, wildfires, invasive species, and vector-borne disease are already damaging agriculture and infrastructure, triggering civil wars, and creating hundreds of thousands of climate refugees.² Ecological strains much milder than the climate crisis have caused societies to collapse throughout history.³ The terrible reality is that climate change threatens everything we know and love.

Thus, the most important question of our time – the question of questions – is: How can we most effectively fight climate change? I propose that those of us who grasp the extent, immediacy, and horror of the threat build a social and political movement – a **Human Climate Movement** – that fundamentally changes the national mood, wakes Americans up to the gravity of the situation, and clarifies the urgent necessity of a war-like, crisis response.⁴ We must channel our dedication and coordinate our activities in the most effective way possible.

So far, a vigorous, collaborative and public conversation about *how* best to build this movement has not occurred.⁵ It has not taken place in the media, or amongst scholars. Some environmental leaders have even suggested that such a discussion should not take place in public, implying that the element of surprise outweighs the benefits of collaboration.⁶ However the anxiety, terror, and helplessness expressed by environmentalists suggest that the movement is facing an existential crisis; current strategies and tactics are not working to drastically reduce global emissions. We fear that there is no solution, or that a solution would be too drastic or politically unattainable. We hold forth in living rooms and Internet chat rooms on whether we are doomed. As we do so, we ignore the vital question.

In lieu of developing a thoughtful strategy, concerned citizens and activists have responded to climate change reflexively, utilizing familiar strategies.⁷ Individuals reduce their carbon footprint. Environmental groups file lawsuits and work to bring modest legislation, like a carbon tax, into consideration. Activist groups stage protests against oil companies and the Keystone Pipeline.

But will these strategies avert the collapse of civilization? Do they even have a chance? Or are they hopelessly minute compared to the scale of the problem? Some argue that the *collective* effect of these diverse campaigns may lead to victory, but is that really probable, given their lack of coordination? Is it really likely that a diffuse environmental movement will succeed against the fossil fuel lobby, climate change-denying politicians, and other forces of environmental destruction? What would “success” even look like? With no clear, comprehensive strategy, it is difficult to even imagine what victory would mean.

¹ See [The Threat](#), Klein, 2013 for a thorough, sourced discussion on climate change as a threat to civilization. Also see [Hansen](#), 2009; [Gore](#), 2013.

² Damage to agriculture: [Gillis](#), 2013; [Bryce](#), 2013; [USDA](#), 2012.

Damage to infrastructure: [McKibben](#), 2010; US [Department of Energy](#);

Civil wars and climate refugees: [US Department of Defense](#); [International Organization for Migration](#), 2013.

³ Ecological problems leading societies to collapse: [Diamond](#), , 2004.

⁴ Discussion of the phrase, [Human Climate Movement](#), Klein, 2013.

⁵ For elaboration, see: [Let’s open-source strategy for the human climate movement](#), Klein, 2013.

⁶ Strategy should not be discussed in public: [Romm](#), 2013.

⁷ For elaboration, see: [Think before you act\(ivism\)](#), Klein, 2013.

Since the Civil Rights Movement, protests and activism have become nearly synonymous. Instead of asking, “How can we most effectively transform society?” we assume the answer is “Protest!” But protest tactics had an entirely different cultural and psychological meaning during the Civil Rights Movement.⁸ African-Americans earned the media spotlight by courageously withstanding racist slurs and violence. During the Civil Rights Movement, the tactics *were* the message. Protests were declarations of equality and dignity; they clearly illustrated the protestors’ refusal to endure racial subjugation. When African-Americans sat at “whites only” lunch counters, they initiated the process of racial integration, in defiance of the law. These protests fought a consensus of denial; before the Civil Rights Movement, white America minimized and ignored the brutality of the Jim Crow South. Civil disobedience cast a spotlight on the courage and restraint of African-Americans, as well as the brutality of segregation. The Civil Rights Movement was a truth movement, and protests and civil disobedience were highly effective tactics in fighting denial.

In stark contrast, climate change protests do not embody the underlying message: We face a planetary crisis and a breakdown of industrial civilization, unless the federal government takes drastic, war-like steps in order to prevent a climate collapse. While civil disobedience in the Civil Rights Movement was considered brave and inspiring, climate change demonstrations are considered boring and annoying by the general public.⁹ Protests are not, in this context, an effective means to fight denial and apathy. By relying on “normal” tactics, such as lobbying and protests, environmental groups have inadvertently presented climate change as a routine political issue, rather than the greatest threat humanity has ever faced. Different fights, different times, and different technological contexts call for different tactics. We are fighting with old tactics, and it isn’t working. It’s time for something new.

Frustrated with the lack of dialogue on *how* to fight the climate crisis, I searched for an answer myself. I studied the history of social movements. What tactics did previous movements utilize? What cultural, psychological, and technological factors made those tactics successful?¹⁰ I examined the mechanisms of power in modern Washington and how Grover Norquist and the Americans for Tax Reform had achieved such influence over politics.¹¹ I studied the psychology of climate change denial, and how it functions on a societal level¹². I developed a plan, and published it.¹³ Since then, other thinkers, scholars, activists and concerned citizens have suggested alterations and additions, improving and bolstering it.¹⁴ Nothing is perfect; this proposal can and should be improved through collaboration. Further, I invite others to submit wholly different strategy proposals for consideration and possible hybridization. We must quickly and collaboratively develop the most effective possible strategy to fight climate change. There is no time for territoriality, ego, or infighting. We must answer the question of our time, together.

⁸ For elaboration, see: [Fighting climate change is different than fighting for Civil Rights](#), Klein, 2013.

⁹ Environmental protests found boring and annoying: [Bashir et al, 2013](#);

¹⁰ Factors in social movements: [Hoffer](#), 1951; [Appiah](#), 2011; [Havel](#), 1978; [Ganz](#), 2012; [Morris](#), 1999

¹¹ How Washington works: [Lessig](#), 2012; [Peters](#), 2012 [Americans for Tax Reform](#), 2013

¹² Psychological and cultural aspects of denial: [Cohen](#), 2001; [Norgaard](#), 2011; [McWilliams](#), 2010; [Lertzmann](#), 2012, [Oreskes & Conway](#), 2012.

¹³ For original plan, see [Klein](#), 2013.

¹⁴ For modifications to original plan, see: [Klein](#), 2013.

A Person-to-Person, Pledge-Based Approach

Your phone rings. It's your old friend. He says he would like to talk with you about climate change. Can he send you a few articles and then meet you for lunch on Wednesday? He is going to have a small gathering at his house next week. You are invited to that, too.

You know climate change is a problem, but you haven't read anything about it for a few years. (Who wants to read that depressing stuff? Plus, you have been so busy.) But you care about your friend, and you are intrigued by his offer.

You accept. You make time. You read the most current assessment of how our climate has already changed, and where it is going. You realize that civilization will not be able to withstand this. Your mind is buzzing with questions: "What is going to happen? How can I protect my family? What should I do?" You can hardly wait to talk over what you have read with your friend. At the Wednesday lunch, he tells you that he shares your feelings. He argues that climate change will bring down human civilization, if we let it. "We don't have to be helpless," he says. "We can fight back." Your friend tells you that he recently signed something called the Human Climate Pledge. The Pledge has the following components:

The **acknowledgement** that:

1. Climate change threatens civilization.
2. Fighting climate change is a strategic and moral imperative. Reducing the amount of Carbon (and Carbon equivalents) in our atmosphere to 350 parts per million must be our top political priority.
3. To preserve civilization, we must fight climate change like we fought WWII: With a government-led, society-wide mobilization. Paul Gilding and Jorgen Randers have presented an example of what this type of mobilization could achieve in their ["One Degree War" plan](#). It includes: Closing 1,000 coal power plants within five years; a carbon tax that funds the One Degree War and also redistributes wealth to the global poor, who are the most impacted by climate change; rationing of electricity and gasoline; massive efforts to halt deforestation; changes to agricultural practices that bind carbon in the soil; the development and installation of renewable energy; huge investments in wide-ranging scientific research and development; and much more. As in any War, the United States will enlist as many nations as allies as possible; this is not a war we can win alone.
4. We must dedicate approximately the same amount of resources to fighting climate change as we did to fight the Axis powers: 36% of our GDP, or approximately 5.6 trillion dollars, per year.

A pledge to:

1. Only give time or money to political candidates who sign the Human Climate Pledge.
2. Vote for candidates who have signed the Pledge in local, state, and national elections, when they are running against a candidate who has not signed.
3. Live in climate truth.¹⁵ Forsake denial, and face the frightening truth of climate change.
4. Spread the truth of climate change to people you know and love, and encourage them to sign the Human Climate Pledge.
5. Encourage existing environmental organizations in your area to endorse the Pledge, helping to unify and coordinate the environmental movement. Work with local groups on publicity, activism, and local climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Your friend tells you how he learned about the Pledge, and why he decided to sign it two months ago. He shows you the Human Climate Pledge App on his phone, which displays the total number of people who have taken the Pledge, as well as profiles of the friends and family members who he has personally persuaded to sign. The HCP App, officially launched only a few weeks ago, indicates that, in total, 234,000 people have signed on, including 17 political candidates and three elected officials. Your friend has administered the Pledge to eight people: his wife, brothers, and a small group of friends. In turn, his family and friends have signed up twenty other people, mainly their family and friends. The App also indicates that, in your city, local chapters of the Sierra Club and 350 have joined the Human Climate Pledge effort, and are hosting monthly public discussions and Pledge signing sessions.

Your friend explains that the Human Climate Pledge is a way of reclaiming a fallen democracy; a way for citizens to *demand* that elected officials acknowledge the scope of the climate crisis and fight it accordingly. It is also a tool for coordinating the passion and dedication of the environmental movement. As more and more citizens sign the Pledge, political candidates will feel increasing pressure to sign the Pledge, and begin to publicly acknowledge the scope of the threat. The Human Climate Movement will create highly motivated voter and donor blocs to support and pressure candidates; these vital networks will constitute a countervailing force to the fossil fuel lobby and others who stand against the perpetuation of human civilization. Municipal and state-level officials who sign the pledge will fiercely advocate for a war-like response to the climate crisis, as they simultaneously implement regional adaptation and resilience measures. As politicians, journalists, and pundits are pressured to sign the Pledge, the media discourse will shift from, “Does this candidate ‘believe’ in climate change?” to “Does this candidate have the courage and strength of character to face the climate crisis, and to fight back?” Because the Human Climate Pledge has a viral structure, powered by the hard truth of climate change, it can both spread widely and fundamentally alter the national mood, almost overnight. Indeed, time is of the essence, as we are racing against

¹⁵ For a definition and discussion of [Living in Climate Truth](#), see Klein, 2013.

our own destruction.¹⁶ The goal of the Human Climate Movement, then, is to have Congress declare an official War on Climate Change, 500 days after the first Pledge is signed.

Your friend explains that you can accrue decision-making power within the Human Climate Movement by signing up as many Pledges as possible, or by devoting time to the organization in other ways. “Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up,” he tells you. “In the Human Climate Movement, there is no free ride. If you want influence, you have to spread the truth of climate change.”

Your friend tells you that he asked you to talk because he cares about you, respects you, and knows that there are many people who would value your opinion. He tells you he hopes you will join this effort; that you sign the Pledge and spread it to other people. That you will join him, live in climate truth, and fight this war of wars. He asks if you want some more reading, and recommends a few further books and articles, as well as a written copy of the Pledge for you to consider. He invites you, Sunday evening at 8:00, to a gathering at his home, where you can talk more about climate change and take the Pledge, if you are ready.

On Sunday, you arrive with a bottle of wine. You are happy to find some people you haven’t seen in a while, and to meet some of your friend’s neighbors. You discuss the material you have read, and how climate change is affecting your area. Your friend puts on a 20-minute video from the organizers of the Human Climate Pledge. It’s a summary of the impacts of climate change, and a discussion of the Pledge. It carefully explains why only a war-like mobilization can stabilize human civilization. It’s a bellicose call to arms – as well as a friendly invitation to join.

Your friend asks if anyone is ready to take the Pledge. Three people say yes. They stand. Your friend asks if they want to dedicate their Pledge to anyone, or offer any comments to the group. A woman says she wants to dedicate her Pledge to her children. She says she would do anything to protect them, and knows that fighting climate change is something that we have to do together. A man says his Pledge is dedicated to his deceased mother, who always hated and feared pollution. After they have offered their comments, they stand and recite the Pledge in unison. The rest of the group claps. People have tears in their eyes.

Your friend registers their Pledges in his HCP App. The new Pledges now download the App themselves. They now have the capacity – and the responsibility – to spread the Pledge to others; to induct them into the Human Climate Movement. Your friend tells the new Pledges that he has some buttons, armbands, and lawn signs, if they want to broadcast their affiliation visually.

Your friend says he will be having people over to his house again in two weeks. All are invited back, and invited to bring others. Maybe they will feel ready to sign. People spend the rest of the evening eating and drinking together, enjoying the atmosphere of shared dedication. It feels like hope.

¹⁶ The necessity of early action: [McCracken, 2008](#).

The Benefits of a Person-to-Person, Pledge-Based Strategy

This Person-to-Person, Pledge-Based Strategy is designed to defeat the widespread intellectual and emotional denial that is crippling our society's response to climate change. Denial is a psychological defense mechanism people employ when they are not emotionally prepared to face reality. The principle benefit of a pledge-based, person-to-person approach is that it helps people contain and process their anxiety and terror, empowering them to understand the truth of climate change, and to fight back. This plan contains anxiety in two crucial ways that protests do not:

- 1) It offers a comprehensive plan that starts *right now* and ends with safety for civilization. In threatening situations, the existence of a plan is critical in overcoming anxiety and terror; plans allow people to approach the unknown future in an organized way and to take an active role in shaping their future. Crucially, this plan allows anyone to be part of implementing it, transforming learned helplessness into collective empowerment.
- 2) It relies on human relationships. By asking people to spread the Pledge to their friends, family, colleagues, and others in their network, this plan allows us to face climate change together. Overcoming emotional denial and facing the truth of climate change is extremely upsetting; if people have to face it on their own, many will simply refuse to do so.

Further, this strategy responds to the shifting technological and media landscape in a novel way, which social movements have historically done. Martin Luther broke ground in utilizing the printing press to spread his message¹⁷. More than four hundred years later, his namesake led civil disobedience that was broadcast on television, which was, at the time, a relatively new communications technology, just beginning to transform American domestic life. Because television only carried three broadcast channels, a movement that attracted the interest of the networks could bring their message, insistently, to every American home.¹⁸

The media environment now is radically different; protests have little chance of achieving that level of sustained, focused, exposure again. We are bombarded by information and stimulation from computers, smartphones, video games, and hundreds of television channels; we screen out the vast majority of news and information. This makes it all too easy to ignore the climate crisis and those seeking to draw attention to it through protests and civil disobedience. The Human Climate Pledge has the potential to break through the high-speed, fragmented media landscape, since it relies on personal appeals between friends, family members, and neighbors. Further, the Pledge App will give the Human Climate Movement organizers the capability to communicate with anyone who has signed, as well as the ability to precisely track the dissemination of the Pledge. Using advanced social media software, the Human Climate Movement will be governed through a modified democratic power structure; voting power on financial decisions within the HCM will be awarded according to how many members you have convinced to sign the Pledge. This meritocratic structure will help the Pledge spread rapidly.

¹⁷ For more on Luther's innovative use of the printing press, see: [Standage](#), 2011.

¹⁸ For a thorough explanation of the role of Television in the Civil Rights Movement see: [Thomas](#), 2004.

This proposal does not preclude the use of other tactics, including demonstrations, lawsuits, Internet memes, and local adaptation measures. On the contrary, a comprehensive, organizing strategy centered on the person-to-person pledge approach would work synergistically with those tactics, creating a foundation upon which they can flourish. Finally, this strategy can be adapted and utilized in any country with an elected government; we can raise our voices, together.

A Call to Collaboration

When people confront an overwhelming reality, they employ various psychological defense mechanisms in order to avoid the pain and anxiety that comes with that knowledge. One way this happens is denial; the truth is too overwhelming, so people reject it entirely. But there are other defense mechanisms that hamper our efficacy. Climate change anxiety can spur activists and concerned citizens to avoid the thoughtful contemplation of diverse options, the study of historical strategies, and the challenging process of open, strategic brainstorming. The threat of climate change makes us feel compelled to *do something now*. But rushed actions will not solve the biggest threat humanity has ever faced. To succeed, we need a thoughtful, comprehensive, revolutionary strategy.

To begin this conversation, I have offered a strategy proposal that was developed with psychological, anthropological, historical, and technological perspectives in mind. I welcome additions, critiques, and counter-proposals. We have a duty to fight the climate crisis, and to keep the world safe for humanity. But first, we need to think together to answer the question of our time. We must conceive the best possible strategy for the Human Climate Movement. I hope you join me.

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